

By Douglas Birch (CP)

KYIV, Ukraine — Ukraine's presidential candidates are accusing one another of planning to steal Sunday's election, with some warning of potential unrest after the vote.

Parliament speaker Vladimir Litvin pleaded Friday with supporters of Ukraine's rival political leaders not to take to the streets as they did during the 2004 Orange Revolution.

"Today I'm calling on all of the politicians not to deal in actions on the Maidan," Litvin said, referring to Kyiv's central square where tens of thousands rallied every day for weeks in late 2004. Litvin is one of 18 candidates in the race.

Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko, who helped lead the Orange forces during the 2004 protests, has accused the Party of Regions of front-runner Viktor Yanukovich of preparing large-scale fraud through falsified absentee ballots and other methods. Some polls show Tymoshenko running second in the presidential contest.

"Right now all staff of the Party of Regions are preparing to change the names on voter registers in the provinces on the day of the vote," Tymoshenko told a government meeting in Kyiv on Wednesday.

Yanukovich meanwhile has warned that his supporters will not allow any candidate to steal the current election, as he claims happened in 2004.

The pro-Russian Yanukovich's initial victory in the presidential race five years ago was thrown out by the courts following the Orange street protests and accusations of widespread fraud on Yanukovich's behalf.

"No such scenario will be allowed," Yanukovich told reporters during a campaign trip to eastern Ukraine, referring to the street rallies that helped reverse his victory. "If anybody is hoping for that, we will disappoint them."

Yanukovich noted that in 2004 he called off plans for mass demonstrations by his supporters in the capital to avoid clashes with Orange protesters.

President Viktor Yushchenko, the eventual winner in 2004, is also standing for re-election, but his popularity has plunged and his chances look slim.

Authorities say they are planning to deploy thousands of police Sunday to ensure an orderly ballot.

Alcee Hastings, a U.S. congressman who is deputy head of the international observer mission, told reporters Friday that so far no one has come up with evidence of intended voting irregularities.

"While the candidates accuse each other of fraud, neither of them has presented you in the media with a smoking gun," he said. "I don't think there's going to be widespread fraud."

Hastings noted that the election will come under intense scrutiny. He said there are more international observers in Ukraine for the presidential contest than for any previous election in the former Soviet Union.

But Hastings did not rule out isolated efforts to falsify votes. "Remember, I'm from Florida, the land of the hanging chads and the butterfly ballots," he said, referring to the disputed 2000 U.S. presidential contest and the controversial Florida vote count.

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